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ABSTRACT

This study compared three reading skill areas (recalling details, understanding a main idea not explicitly stated, and making inferences) in Spanish, the subjects' native language, and American English, their second language. The sample consisted of 47 adults from nine Latin American countries and Puerto Rico who were completing an intensive ESOL program. The test results indicated that, for the subjects of this study, competency in a skill in one language did not manifest itself in the other language. One reason for the finding is speculated to be the differing world views held by different language/culture groups. Second language reading instructors are urged to help students unravel the target culture's conceptual universe as manifested in its prose. (Author/AMH)

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COMPARING READING COMPREHENSION IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH BY ADULT HISPANICS ENTERING A TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

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Comparing Reading Comprehension In Spanish and English By Adult Hispanics Entering A Two-Year College

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This paper describes a study conducted at the Institute for Intensive English of Union College, a two-year institution within the New Jersey community college system. The purpose of the study was to compare three reading comprehension skill areas - recalling details, understanding a main idea not explicitly stated, and making inferences - in the subjects' native language (Spanish) and in their additional language (American English).

The hypothesis was made that for the given population the differences of the mean score for recalling details, finding the main idea, and making inferences on an L_1 reading test and on an L_2 reading test would be statistically significant. In other words, the subjects' ability or inability at the three skill areas in Spanish would not be significantly related to their ability or inability to perform these same tasks in English. It should be noted that getting a higher score in Spanish than in English because of greater familiarity with the language is not the issue here. (Indeed, some students got "higher" scores on the English subtests!) Rather, the comparison deals with correlated means.

Subjects

Between August, 1977 and August, 1978 every Hispanic in the most advanced level offered by the Institute was asked if s/he would be willing to participate in this study. Forty-seven students agreed to do so. Each subject was potentially within four weeks of receiving the certificate of completion necessary to apply for freshman status at the College; students who subsequently failed the meet the exit criteria and had to repeat the course were not screened out.

The sample consisted of 30 females and 17 males ranging in age from 16 to 51, mean age being 30. They came from nine Latin American countries and Puerto Rico. The two largest nationality subgroups were Columbians and Cubans. Most of the subjects had either completed 12 years of school or received a high school equivalency certificate.

Instruments

The reading subtest of the Comparative Guidance and Placement Program (CGP), disseminated by the Educational Testing Service, was selected to measure English reading comprehension skills. The target group for the CGP is the two-year college entrant.

After considerable searching was done, the reading subtest of the Spanish version of the high school equivalency practice test was settled upon. Thus, to measure the three skills in Spanish, Programa de Equivalencia para la Escuela Secundaria, Las Pruebas Muestras, Prueba 4: Interpretación de Selecciones Literarias was used.

Each test contained reading passages on a variety of topics followed by multiple-choice questions probing the three skill areas. A sample selection from each test is attached as Appendix A and B.

Both tests were somewhat modified in order to include a main idea item for each reading selection and to eliminate vocabulary questions.

Approximately half the students took the Spanish test first, and the other half began with the English test. No time limit was imposed, so students took from two to three hours to complete both tests.

Treatment of the Data

Raw scores were calculated and converted to percent. Further, to equalize the relative difficulty of the English test to the Spanish, a weighting factor was computed. Using L_1 percent scores and weighted L_2 percent scores, *t* tests were performed for each of the three skill areas in order to find the significance of the difference between the correlated means. Also, a coefficient of correlation was calculated for each skill area using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation formula.

Findings

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and *t* values for the three reading skill areas.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF ADJUSTED PERCENTAGE READING SCORES FOR L_1 AND L_2 TESTS (N = 47)

	Spanish		English		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*[a]
Detail	72	12.49	72	27.53	3.49
Main Idea	59	20.15	74	27.19	3.97
Inference	66	16.72	59	23.08	3.57

[a]For 45 *df*, a *t* value of 2.02 is needed for a null hypothesis at the 5% level of confidence; and 2.69 is needed at the 1% level of confidence.

For 45 degrees of freedom, a *t* value of 2.69 or greater is needed at the 1% level of confidence to show that the differences are significant. As the table shows, the difference for each skill area in the two languages was statistically significant. For the subjects in this study, then, competency in a skill in one language did not manifest itself in the other language. That is, the students' adeptness or lack thereof in recalling details, finding the main idea, and making inferences in one language did not carry over to the other language.

Further support for this finding can be seen in the correlation coefficients for the L_1 and L_2 skill areas: detail, .50; main idea, .37; and inference, .28. Thus, the amounts accounted for range from approximately 9% to 25%, leaving the majority of the variance unaccounted for.

Implications

Perhaps the findings are the result of the relatively small sample size or the vagaries of the tests. Of course, additional studies involving a variety of languages need to be undertaken to corroborate the determinations made herein. However, from what is known about logic in various cultures, one can speculate that at least some of the reason why there was a significant difference between L_1 and L_2 reading skills is related to the differing models of the world which are held by differing language/culture groups.

Though there are competing theories about the reading process, there is general agreement that the successful reader is one who takes from the printed page the meaning intended by the writer. However, shared knowledge of phonemes, graphemes, syntax, and semantics are insufficient for this interaction process to take place. The reader and the writer must also share a common model of the world. Thus, when second language learners read in L_2, the intended meaning may elude them because they perceive the universe to be organized in a different way than the L_2 writer does.

Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, wrote that each language articulates or organizes the world differently (Culler, 1977). A language/culture does not simply supply words for an independently-existing reality; instead, it articulates its own model of the world.

Kaplan (1966) applied Saussure's theory to the teaching of writing to L_2 students. Kaplan reminded us that rhetoric, which is based upon logic, is culture-bound. "A fallacy of some repute and some duration is the one which assumes that because a student can write an adequate essay in his native language, he can necessarily write an adequate essay in a second language" (p. 3). Thus, Kaplan advocates that L_2 instructors make their students aware of the thought patterns, or logic system, of the L_2 language/culture. When the Weltanschauung of the second language becomes clear to the student, s/he can begin to communicate using the L_2 rhetorical organization.

We have been slow in seeing that the need for a common model of the world in necessary in L_2 reading as well. Elias and Ingram (1977) have recently pointed to the need for the successful second language reader to bring to the printed page a model of the world compatible with that of the L_2 writer. "It is stressed that both the language system and the model of the world are of primary importance if fluent reading skills are to be successfully and efficiently developed..." (p. 38).

The study described in this paper has attempted to show that a Hispanic's abilities to remember details, find the main idea, and make inferences based on a reading selection in Spanish are not related to his/her abilities to do so in English. Part of the reason for this phenomenon is thought to be the difference between the L_1 and L_2 models of the world, a difference not yet clearly perceived by the subjects of the study.

The implications for L_2 reading instruction are obvious, yet difficult to implement. Instructors must develop in the students an understanding of the target language's model of the world. They need to follow the advice of Eskey (1973):

> If reading is to lead to understanding, the reader must have at least a minimum access to the writer's underlying assumptions about his subject and, perhaps, the larger world of which that subject forms a part. To provide it, the cultural subcomponent (of a model L_2 reading program) must include a good deal of cross-cultural information, more specifically information about the writer's conceptual universe... (p. 180)

If our hope is to prepare our second language students to compete successfully in classrooms with native speakers, we must address the complicated task of helping them unravel the L_2 model of the world as manifested in its prose.

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Appendix A

From the Comparative Guidance and Placement Program, Form UPG. Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1972.

Black Americans love their country enough to criticize her fundamentally. Many white Americans simply cannot be bothered. Ironically enough, in the middle of the twentieth century, black man is the new white hope. To live castrated in a great white harem and yet somehow maintain his black manhood and his humanity--this is the essence of the new man created out of the black invention. History may render the verdict that this was the greatest legacy handed to the New World by the West.

Western man wrote his history as if it were the history of the entire human race. I hope that colored men all over the world have watched Western man too long to commit the fatal folly of writing history with a colored pencil. For there is great wisdom in the old Ghana proverb: "No one rules forever on the throne of time."

We black folk have learned many lessons during our sojourn in this place. One of them is the truth of another Ghana proverb: "Only a fool points to his heritage with his left hand." We are becoming prouder and prouder of our heritage in America and Africa. And we know the profound difference between pride and arrogance. Yes, we black people stand ready, eager, willing, and able to make our contribution to the culture of the world. Our dialogue will not be protest but affirmation of the human dignity of all people everywhere.

26 The author most strongly suggests that criticism can be proof of

(1) love
(2) pride
(3) eagerness
(4) arrogance

27 Which of the following best explains what the author means when he speaks of "writing history with a colored pencil" (line 13)?

(1) Writing history that makes the deeds of men seem overly important.
(2) Writing history that leaves out the suffering of blacks.
(3) Writing history that emphasizes the deeds of only one group of people.
(4) Writing history that includes the entire human race.

28 According to the author, the black man's contribution to the culture of the world will be to

(1) uphold the worth of men of all races and nations
(2) muffle the voices of those who criticize their homeland
(3) protest against the influences of the past
(4) teach others the true meaning of oppression

29 The author quotes the proverb "Only a fool points to his heritage with his left hand" (lines 18-19) in order to emphasize that the heritage of black people

(1) has been neglected by Western man
(2) is something they should be proud of
(3) is often overemphasized by historians
(4) has misled men in the fight for equality

30 Which sentence most clearly expresses the main idea of the passage?

(1) Blacks are emerging as social critics and as defenders of the dignity of man.
(2) The black American has been discriminated against too long.
(3) Blacks are becoming prouder and prouder of their heritage.
(4) Western man has written his history as if his were the only culture on earth.

Appendix B

From Programa de equivalencia para la escuela secundaria: Folleto de información para el uso de los candidatos. Washington, D.C.: The General Education Development Testing Service of the American Council on Education, 1976.

Se lo encargaban por cable. Llegó a ser el guía preferido por los millonarios. Sus festivas labias, su alegría triste, la alegría que gusta a los magnates, y su envejecida risa de clown.

--Ladies and gentlemen . . ., no se preocupen, fueron nuestros volcanes los que destruyeron esta ciudad grande y poderosa, y en cuanto a la obra de sus pilotos que dejaron en el suelo otras de nuestras poblaciones, tampoco se precupen que, por lo que ustedes ven, los terremotos nos tenían entrenados . . . país de expertos en ver caer ciudades . . .

--Muchas gracias, señor, por lo que ha dicho--interrumpió alguno de los turistas--, al hacernos la preciosa salvedad de que esta ciudad no fue destruida por nuestra aviación . . . La agrego a mi lista . . . Ya son muchas las cosas que no hemos destruido nosotros.

--Poca importancia, señor . . . --decía otro de los turistas--. Ninguna importancia . . . si nosotros la hubiéramos destruido ya estaría reconstruida . . . Por eso mejor que los destruimos nosotros y no los terremotos . . . Pero como ser peligroso que se fuera a creerse que nuestra aviación había hecho esta ciudad en ruinas, la vamos a reconstruir . . .

--¿Reconstruirla? --se le fue el aliento a Milocho.

--Sí, señor, vamos a reconstruirla en seguida . . .

--¿Reconstruirla en seguida? . . .

Ya Milocho no podía hablar.

--Pero, señor, si por eso advertí que no la destruyeron ustedes . . .

--Eso no importa . . .

--Sí importa, señor, sí importa . . .

La amenaza de este turista obcecado y multimillonario fue llevada a los periódicos locales, con letras grandes, en las informaciones, y tratada en los editoriales, como tema de candente acualidad. "No, no--se leía en los periódicos entre líneas--, que no la reconstruyan, que no se molesten . . . bastante arruinados no tienen ya, para querernos acabar de arruinar, quitándonos nuestras ruinas, base de la industria turística del país."

20 Milocho es un
(1) guía de turistas
(2) periodista
(3) sociólogo
(4) intérprete
(5) mozo de hotel

21 Milocho aparenta asumir al principio una actidud de
(1) preocupado
(2) amargado
(3) historiador
(4) adulador
(5) pícaro

22 Cuando el autor dice que Milocho tenía una "alegría triste" está insinuado que
(1) tiene mucha pena
(2) la alegría es verdadera
(3) la alegría es aparente
(4) la tristeza es innecesaria
(5) vacila entre alegre y triste

23 Los turistas de esta lectura paracen ser
(1) rusos
(2) alemanes
(3) fraceses
(4) suramericanos
(5) norteamericanos

24 Según Milocho, la ciudad había sido destruida por
(1) bombardeos
(2) terremotos
(3) inundaciones
(4) incendios
(5) ventarrones

25 La actitud de Milocho ante la idea de reconstruir la ciudad es de
(1) alegría
(2) temor
(3) duda
(4) agradecimiento
(5) gracia

26 Los periodicos publicaron un editorial prostestando de que
(1) les quitaran la fuente del turismo
(2) les quemaran la ciudad
(3) se quedaran los tristas
(4) les bombardearan de nuevo la ciudad
(5) les trasladaran la ciudad

27 La selección describe
(1) la vida de Milocho
(2) las ideas de viajeros ricos
(3) la amenaza de reconstruir una ciudad destruida
(4) los editoriales en los periódicos locales
(5) la industria turística

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